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Introduction

The revival of Kleiat' s René Mouawad Airport (KRMA) represents more than the reopening of an underutilized aviation facility; it reflects an attempt to reshape Lebanon' s transport infrastructure and diversify its aviation gateways. Lebanon' s historical reliance on Beirut Rafic Hariri International Airport (BRHIA) as its sole operational commercial airport has exposed the country to security, operational, and economic vulnerabilities, some of which will be discussed below. Against this backdrop, the revival of KRMA brings a long-delayed development project in Northern Lebanon closer to operation and could provide the region with an important new economic and transport gateway.

Following years of calls to reopen the airport, the Lebanese government pledged in its Ministerial Statement to reactivate KRMA for commercial aviation. The airport was originally built in 1930 and primarily served military purposes. It was also used for civilian aviation for a limited period during the Lebanese Civil War, particularly between 1988 and 1990, before its commercial operations were later suspended.

KRMA Restoration¹

The current government began undertaking the necessary administrative and technical procedures to fulfill its commitment to reopen KRMA. As an initial step, Dar Al-Handasah (Shair and Partners) was assigned to conduct the required studies and prepare a preliminary master plan for the rehabilitation of the northern airport.

¹Information and figures in this section are primarily based on Lebanon Opportunities, Issue 286 – Summer 2026, "Two Airports and Three National Airlines."

Subsequently, in February 2026, the Council of Ministers (COM) launched a tender for the operation of the facility. Sky Lounge Services ultimately won the tender after the Ministry of Public Works and Transport evaluated the three financial offers that reached the final stage of the bidding process, out of 18 firms that had initially submitted offers.

Under the operating contract, Sky Lounge Services will grant the Lebanese State 8% of net profits, subject to a minimum annual guarantee of \$200,000. The company is required to build and equip the airport within a strict 90-day period following the issuance of the final licenses. In return, the operator will benefit from an exemption from airport fees during the first two years of operation.

The project envisages a terminal covering approximately 1,500–2,000 square meters, with the capacity to accommodate around 150 passengers per hour. An expansion plan is also proposed, allowing passenger capacity to rise from around 100,000 passengers during first year to as many as 600,000 passengers annually.

Sky Lounge Services will additionally be responsible for maintaining and operating airport equipment and facilities, including scanners, security and customs counters, electricity infrastructure, and arrival and departure gates. In return, the company will benefit from revenues generated through passenger and aircraft operating fees, as well as commercial activities at the airport, including catering, advertising, and cargo services, among others.

One of the company's main advantages is its existing experience in airport operations. Sky Lounge Services has been involved in ground-handling services, as well as civil and private aviation activities, at Beirut Rafic Hariri International Airport since 2008.

Nonetheless, the initial target for the commencement of partial operations at KRMA, which had been set for early October, was postponed due to technical issues. In an interview published by Annahar on October 6, Minister of Public Works and Transport Fayez Rasamny provided an updated timeline for the project, indicating that commercial operations are anticipated to launch before the end of the year, following the completion of the remaining logistical, security, and legal requirements.

The benefits associated with rehabilitating KRMA extend beyond merely establishing a second operational airport. The project is accompanied by infrastructure plans intended to improve accessibility, including a road connecting the airport to the Abdeh–Arida highway and a proposed public transportation link with Beirut. Such complementary infrastructure will be essential if KRMA is to develop into a viable regional transportation hub rather than operate as an isolated aviation facility.

The Ministry of Public Works and Transport is also seeking to attract low-cost carriers to operate from KRMA. Initial destinations are expected to include Mersin, Istanbul, and Dubai, with Medina, Cairo, and Athens potentially being added at a later stage.

Alongside regional low-cost carriers and Fly Beirut, a low-cost airline planned by Middle East Airlines, Al Mada Airlines is also awaiting its Air Operator Certificate and the completion of KRMA's rehabilitation. Al Mada Airlines is a sister company of IBEX Air Charter, which operates charter services between Beirut and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

However, the reopening of a second airport in Northern Lebanon appears to constitute only the first phase of a broader aviation strategy. A subsequent phase would seek to integrate BRHIA and KRMA under a single International Finance Corporation (IFC) framework through a long-term Public-Private Partnership (PPP). Such an arrangement could potentially improve KRMA's commercial viability and financial backing while facilitating the attraction of a Tier 1 international airport operator. Accordingly, the current agreement with Sky Lounge Services could potentially be terminated once the longer-term PPP structure becomes operational.

At the same time, BRHIA is also expected to undergo substantial infrastructure investment. Planned investments of around \$500 million aim to expand the airport's capacity by approximately five million additional passengers. This suggests that the government's strategy is not necessarily to shift aviation activity away from Beirut, but rather to develop a complementary two-airport system capable of accommodating future passenger growth while improving the resilience of Lebanon's aviation infrastructure.

Furthermore, Fly Beirut is expected to be launched by mid-2027, with plans to operate five Airbus A320 aircraft. Its initially planned destinations include Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen, Dubai, Düsseldorf, Istanbul, and Paris. The development of new carriers alongside additional airport capacity could therefore gradually reshape Lebanon's aviation landscape and broaden connectivity with European and regional markets.

Connectivity and Potential Economic Impact

The economic importance of KRMA extends well beyond aviation itself. Establishing a functioning commercial airport in Northern Lebanon could stimulate investment in the surrounding region and improve its connectivity with domestic and international markets. Increased passenger and tourism activity could generate additional demand for hotels, restaurants, transportation services, retail establishments, logistics facilities, and other supporting businesses.

Consequently, KRMA has the potential to generate an economic multiplier effect. Direct employment at the airport could be complemented by indirect employment across tourism, transportation, hospitality, logistics, retail, and other service industries. More importantly, improved connectivity could strengthen the attractiveness of Northern Lebanon as an investment destination, particularly if airport development is accompanied by improvements in road networks and other supporting infrastructure.

The cargo dimension could prove equally significant. Given KRMA's location in Northern Lebanon and its relative proximity to the Syrian border, the airport could eventually develop a role in regional logistics and cargo transportation. If supported by adequate road and potentially rail infrastructure, KRMA could become part of a wider transportation corridor linking air freight with Northern Lebanon and neighboring markets.

Challenges and Risks

Despite its potential economic benefits, the successful development of KRMA is not guaranteed. Several challenges will have to be addressed if the airport is to evolve from an infrastructure project into a commercially sustainable aviation hub.

Political and Institutional Risk: The project's long-term success will depend on maintaining transparent governance and insulating commercial and operational decisions from political interference. Clear institutional responsibilities will be particularly important once the project moves toward a broader PPP framework.

Public-Private Partnership Framework: Founding a commercially viable PPP will require a clear allocation of responsibilities and risks between the State and private operators. The framework must also provide adequate incentives to attract a reputable international operator while maintaining State's long-term interests.

Airport Safety, Security, and International Aviation Standards: KRMA will need to satisfy international aviation, safety, and security requirements if it is to attract established international airlines and build passenger confidence.

Customs and Border-Control Requirements: As an international gateway, the airport will require effective customs, immigration, and border-control infrastructure supported by adequate staffing and coordination among the relevant government agencies, similar to what is being done in BRHIA.

Infrastructure and Operating Costs: The airport itself cannot function efficiently without adequate supporting infrastructure. Road accessibility, electricity, telecommunications, airport equipment, maintenance, and potentially public transportation links will require continuous investment.

Passenger Demand and Traffic Sufficiency: Perhaps the most important commercial question concerns whether passenger demand will be sufficient to sustain operations over the long term. The success of KRMA will depend not merely on opening new routes but on establishing sufficient and recurring passenger traffic to make those routes commercially viable for airlines and airport operators.

Conclusion

Lebanon should view Kleiat's René Mouawad Airport and Beirut Rafic Hariri International Airport as complementary components of a broader national aviation and transportation strategy. Developing KRMA could reduce Lebanon's dependence on a single commercial aviation gateway while improving connectivity, supporting regional development, and creating new investment opportunities in Northern Lebanon.

Encouragingly, the government's plans appear to extend beyond the airport itself. Discussions concerning the revival of railway connectivity between the airport area and the Syrian border could further enhance KRMA's potential role as a regional logistics and cargo hub, particularly if air, road, and rail infrastructure are eventually integrated into a coherent transportation network.

Ultimately, reopening KRMA represents an opportunity to transform a project that remained dormant for decades into a productive economic asset. Its success, however, will depend on more than completing the terminal and launching commercial flights. Transparent governance, adequate infrastructure, commercially viable passenger demand, effective public-private cooperation, and limited political interference will determine whether KRMA becomes merely Lebanon's second operational airport or develops into a genuine catalyst for economic activity and regional development in Northern Lebanon.

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